

Narrator:

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Black History Month honors the struggles and triumphs of millions of American citizens over the most devastating obstacles — including slavery, prejudice, and poverty — as well as their contributions to the nation's cultural and political life. This February, America.gov presents a complete look at Black History Month with photo galleries, in-depth publications, and multimedia presentations. Visit www.america.gov to learn more.

According to Obama administration officials, the agricultural sector of Afghanistan is, after security, the Number 1 priority in the country. Afghanistan is 80 percent agricultural; and officials acknowledge that security and agriculture are very closely related. As farmers replace opium poppies with legitimate crops, increased profitability and more jobs create an attractive alternative to joining the Taliban.

Richard Holbrooke, the State Department's special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, told reporters February 3rd that the goal is nothing less than to help Afghanistan restore its agricultural sector to the vibrant export economy that it once had, and which was progressively destroyed starting in 1978.

An increase in agricultural exports, such as almonds, pomegranates and grapes, not only will create many more jobs in farming, road building and other important economic areas, but may provide an alternative to people who might otherwise earn money fighting for the Taliban. Holbrooke acknowledged that along with economic development, the agricultural rebuilding program shares a similar counterinsurgency goal.

The Taliban have been attacking the reintegration program, which is now receiving international support through a trust fund. The fund is expected to total about \$500 million and could be used to provide jobs and housing for returning Taliban fighters, many of whom are believed to have joined the organization to earn money rather than to support its religiously extremist ideology.

Agricultural assistance will be more challenging for the Taliban to counter. In an agricultural country like Afghanistan, it is indeed difficult to attack programs that give people seed and fertilizer and market access. Holbrooke added that the agricultural effort is the most successful civilian program already, and it's just started.

U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack, who visited Afghanistan January 10th through 12th, said the program is reducing opium poppy cultivation. Through U.S. Agriculture Department programs, like a \$20 million commitment to Afghanistan's Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock, local farmers are participating in a strategy to produce legitimate crops that can actually be far more profitable than poppy production.

Vilsack identified ongoing challenges, such as more technical assistance to Afghan farmers and a formalized credit process that will guarantee farmers the resources needed to plant their crops. But

Afghan farmers are responding positively to these new programs to diversify crops to include not only staples, but also cash crops that will create export opportunities.

Nearly three weeks after the January 12th earthquake hit Haiti, U.S. officials say the relief effort is shifting from search and rescue toward sustainability and economic recovery, ahead of an international donors conference that is expected to be held in March at the United Nations.

The distribution of food, water, shelter and medical assistance to the Haitian people is continuing at an ever-increasing rate. Aid delivery and coordination between the Haitian government and the international community is becoming more efficient and reaches more people, and now more attention is focused on the country's long-term recovery.

In partnership with the U.N. Development Programme, the Haitian government has been directing a jobs program that employs 5,600 people per day, mostly clearing rubble. U.S. Agency for International Development Administrator Rajiv Shah said their work is very important in creating more space for meeting needs such as temporary housing. The program is expected to expand beyond the capital, Port-au-Prince, to provide more sources of income and to play a role in eventually transitioning the country back to a private-sector economy.

In the jobs program, local mayors and local political leaders identify priorities in their areas. The on a day-to-day basis they go out and hire people, pay a minimum wage and provide the employment opportunity. They also get important public works done. Shah said the number employed has doubled from 2,800 to 5,600. That number is expected to grow significantly through February. The goal is provide more jobs every day.

The United States has now provided more than 800,000 Haitians with food and two-week ration packages, with the rate tripling from 45,000 served per day during the beginning of the effort to the current level of more than 120,000 per day. More than 250,000 have also been served outside of Port-au-Prince, and the international community has lowered its projected target of people needing long-term food assistance from 4 million to 2 million.

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